MARCELO GUIMARÃES LIMA

ON THE PANDEMIC AND THE IMAGINATION OF DISASTER

CADERNOS DO CEPAOS

The Imagination of Disaster: on the pandemic and other unnatural catastrophes.

Marcelo Guimarães Lima

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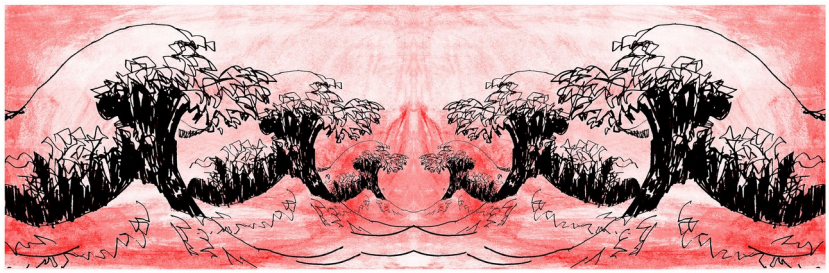
Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Day After I, digital painting, 2011, from The Imagination of Disaster series

The Imagination of Disaster: on the pandemic and other unnatural catastrophes.

Marcelo Guimarães Lima

In 2011, together with my colleague, painter Julia Townsend, I presented the exhibition **The Imagination of Disaster** at Total Arts Gallery in Dubai . As stated in the introduction: *"The Imagination of Disaster presents a visual reflection on the experience of catastrophes,*



Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Tsunami, digital painting, 2011, from The Imagination of Disaster series

cataclysms and disasters in our times: from global to personal" (see the catalog here).

The exhibition featured a "reflection by way of images" about the tsunami that touched the coast of Japan in March 2011 and destroyed the locality of Fukushima, hitting the local nuclear facilities and generating a nuclear accident that was compared in severity and potential for destruction to the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 in the then Soviet Union.

The title of the exhibition referred to the well-known essay by American essayist and novelist Susan Sontag (*1*). In her piece, Sontag examined disasters, the fantasies of annihilation of the human species in science fiction films during the Cold War period. In these films, according to the writer, the fantasy of fear symbolically articulated the actual fear of nuclear war.

In the so-called *science fiction* films it was possible to imagine the unimaginable, to imagine human destruction not only of particular individuals or specific collectivities, but total collective destruction, a

Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Fukushima, digital painting, 2011, from The Imagination of Disaster series

thought made possible in factual terms for the first time in history by the existing arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. These allowed people to conceive the destruction of the planet, that is, of the natural and social- historical environment, and with it the destruction of the human species as a kind of concluding episode, definitive and somewhat absurd, of the wanderings of humanity, the end of the millennial adventure of the species.

The imaginary representation of the "unrepresentable" or inwardly inconceivable served, in its own way, as a form of generalized "catharsis". Representing what is feared in reality as fiction served to appease the spirit, to distance oneself from or to sublimate real fear, with its threat of destructuring and paralyzing the subject, by way of imaginary narratives that, unfolding the real anguish into fictional fear, contributed additionally as an anesthetic for the mind, it contributed to

Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Day After II, digital painting, 2011, from The Imagination of Disaster series

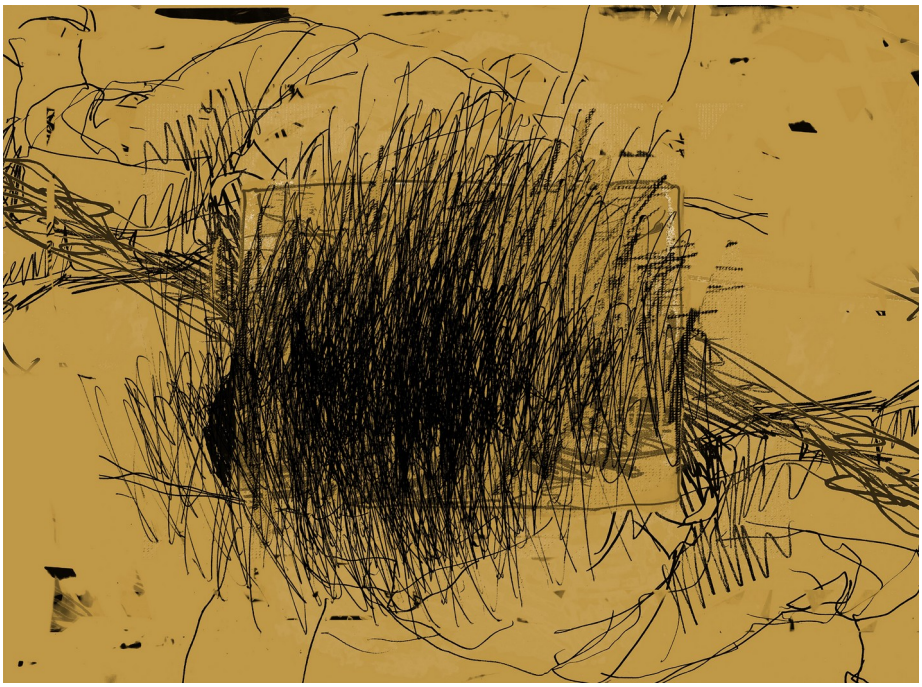
prevent the rational confrontation with the threat of atomic war and the effective, that is, active and no longer passive, understanding of the present situation, the understanding of its genesis, nature and possible alternatives. The fiction of disaster added the functions of therapy and ideology.

The *ideology of fear* is what we can perhaps call the central theme around which Susan Sontag developed an important part of her essay works in books like ***Illness as Metaphor*** (1978), ***AIDS and its Metaphors*** (1988), ***Regarding the pain of others*** (2003).

Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Event Horizon, digital painting, 2011, from The Imagination of Disaster series

Regarding the subject of health, Sontag notes that illness is also part of life, it is the other side of life, dark, somber, but no less substantial. Illness is a country, she writes, where we all have to go, for more or less extended periods of time, and of which we are also **citizens**. Sontag's metaphorical concept is here at the same time spatial, temporal and civic.

Susan Sontag examines, with arguments and images, that is, with her own particular metaphors, other current metaphors that represent disease through "sentimental" and (self) "punitive" images that concern not so much the effective experience of each individual, but the representations that a particular society creates and employs: this kind of thinking that, we may point out, in a kind of *inversion* of the usual process, *thinks* the subjects, instead of being conceived by the individuals, and thus tends to subject minds and to determine actions



Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Aftermath, digital painting, 2011, from The Imagination of Disaster series

and reactions, to produce the individuals´ (mis)representations of themselves and of the world.

Metaphor is, of course, one of the essential modalities of thinking. And yet, as much as language itself, like any living being, it needs care and mainly needs constant renewal. The function of the creative uses of words, of literature, here in the form of the essay, of artistic creation in general, is to free the subject from automatic meanings, cliches, imposing, vulgarized, exhausted, debilitated and debilitating images in the face of a constantly changing human reality. Literature has a pedagogical function as a kind of *counter-ideology* in the philosophical-therapeutic tradition of Plato's Socratic dialogues which, in turn, can also be considered in essential ways as dramatic essays, as works of literary art.

Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Memento, digital painting, 2011, from The Imagination of Disaster series

Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Acephalous, digital painting, 2011, from The Imagination of Disaster series

Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Dark Wave, digital painting, 2011, from The Imagination of Disaster series

Against the automatism of perception and language, the purpose of art, as the Russian Formalists observed at the beginning of the 20th century, is to renew experience and meanings. As Susan Sontag noted in her essay, the topic of disasters is one of the oldest in the arts (*2*). The works of the exhibition **The Imagination of Disaster** presented a visual commentary on the images and meanings of the Fukushima tragedy, its human, systemic, ecological implications, among others.

S. Žizek in his recently published *causeries* on the current corona virus pandemic (*3*) warns us against the symbolism, equally sentimental and self-punishing in many aspects, of what is certainly disastrous for us, but in itself, that is, strictly considered, it is just one more accident of nature which, as such, has nothing more significant to say to us. Nature, the universe in general, is not an interlocutor engaged in the mutual recognition of subjectivities as it is typical of dialogues. Only

the age-old narcissism of the species makes us to expect personal responses from the universe on such occasions.

We can point out, for instance, that in the same way as the gods of Epicurus, enjoying immortality and absorbed in their divine affairs, were indifferent to human destiny (Epicurus thus banished fear of the divine from human life), so nature here tells us nothing. In the vital crisis that afflicts us today it can only gives us, according to Žizek, the measure of our own insignificance in the cosmic order.

And yet, we can reply that the pandemic, an announced disaster, tells us a lot about the globalized world and the times in which we live. The virtue of certain extreme situations is, obviously, to clarify, to separate the essential from the accessory, to reveal in compelling, unmistakable ways, the reality of a given circumstance and the possible / necessary choices in it.

The first evidence is that up to this moment we lived in a context in which the "unthinkable" had no place, where unlimited manipulation of the meaning of our actions and beliefs prevailed. The press, professional journalism and social media, far from being opposed, have complemented each other in expanding the empire of private opinion and particular interests over information and objective knowledge. The pandemic exposes this situation in which the conflict between "deep" and "spontaneous" convictions, subjective opinion on the one hand, and effective knowledge on the other has immediate vital implications. Fabricated "beliefs" have no value for individual and collective survival. On the contrary: ignorance and prejudice are immediately mortal dangers.

This ideological "superstructure" corresponds to a basic structure: globalized neoliberal capitalism governing our lives and our deaths. The insufficiencies, the waste, the precariousness, the vital risks of the current global organization of the processes of material survival of society are unequivocally posed, as a *de facto* situation, significant in its general implications, a situation that we must confront with a clear mind and respond to with proper actions.

As philosopher Marilena Chauí (*4*) observed, in the corona virus crisis, the neoliberal gospel is suddenly "desecrated", the official and unofficial discourse, in the world centers of the system and partially in the periphery, starts to talk about state intervention, production control, universal income and universal health policies, public health care, and similar anathemas. The reversal of the dominant discourse indicates the relative, but no less effective, evident exhaustion of determined political and ideological practices and the need for changes in the global power structure, in the economy and in international relations. How?

Two possible responses are examined by experts, critics and thinkers: the first points to a new solidarity born from the experience of mutual support groups, health professionals, volunteers, popular organizations designing new forms and institutions of collective life that the present crisis has shown to be vitally necessary, and not just more or less desirable.

The second response, indicates new centralized control mechanisms on a corporate and state basis. On the one hand, the germs of a new "communism" beyond the neoliberal (dis) order, according to Žizek; on the other, the triumph of bio-politics, of naked life, of mere survival as an "ideal", of totalitarian control of bodies and hearts. Here the neoliberal hypocritically selective "antistatism" shows its true face of covering-up totalitarian practices of power, producing a *de facto* reinforcement of the ideological apparatuses of the state (religion, family ideology, etc.) and of the material state apparatus of repression.

The pandemic has been added to the latent crisis of the global economic system since the events of 2008 and the manifest crisis is advancing rapidly. It presents to us, in an increasingly urgent and clear way, as Žizek observes, the conflict and decision between civilization and administered barbarism.

Almost a decade after the Fukushima disaster, a new and expanded material crisis of global repercussion, this time directly affecting the world population in a "democratic" way, that is, without taking too much into account national borders, class barriers, etc. updates the

imagination of disaster and asks for new responses from human creative intelligence to the challenges of the present and the future.

Artworks from an ongoing series of ***Quarantine Drawings*** are presented here and continue thematically the earlier ***Imagination of Disaster*** series elaborating, as art has done from the beginning, on the collective vital challenges of the present, challenges that are at the same time spiritual and material to our ways of life, to our expressed and unexpressed values, and to the vital forms of solidarity that we must more and more consciously and effectively create, recreate and promote among ourselves relating in more and more inclusive ways our "all too human" condition, both fragile and resilient, to the general conditions of life on the planet.

1) Sontag, S. - ***The Imagination of Disaster***, in ***Against Interpretation and Other Essays***. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,1996

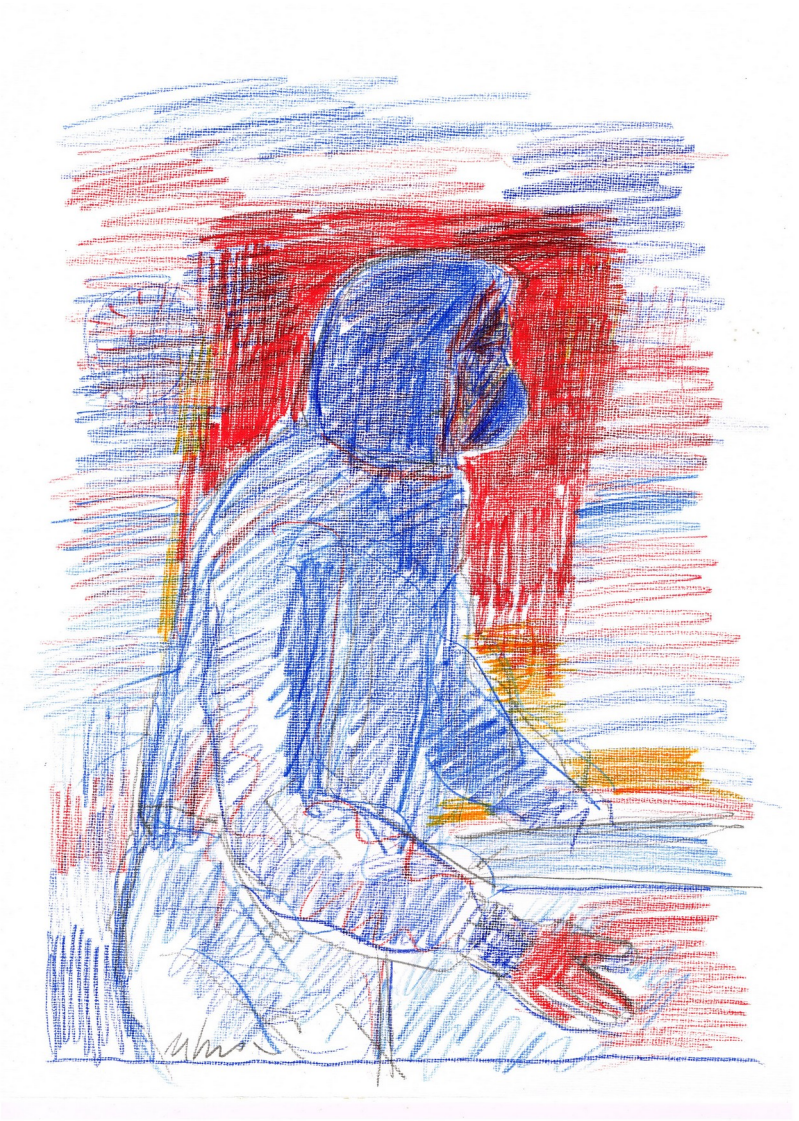
2) An example that I analyzed in the essay ***Flux, spirals and the imagination of destruction*** is the series of drawings by Leonardo da Vinci called ***Diluvios*** (Deluges) available at archive.org – Marcelo Guimaraes Lima

3) Žizek, S. - P***ANDEMIC! COVID-19 Shakes the World***, New York • London: OR Books,, 2020

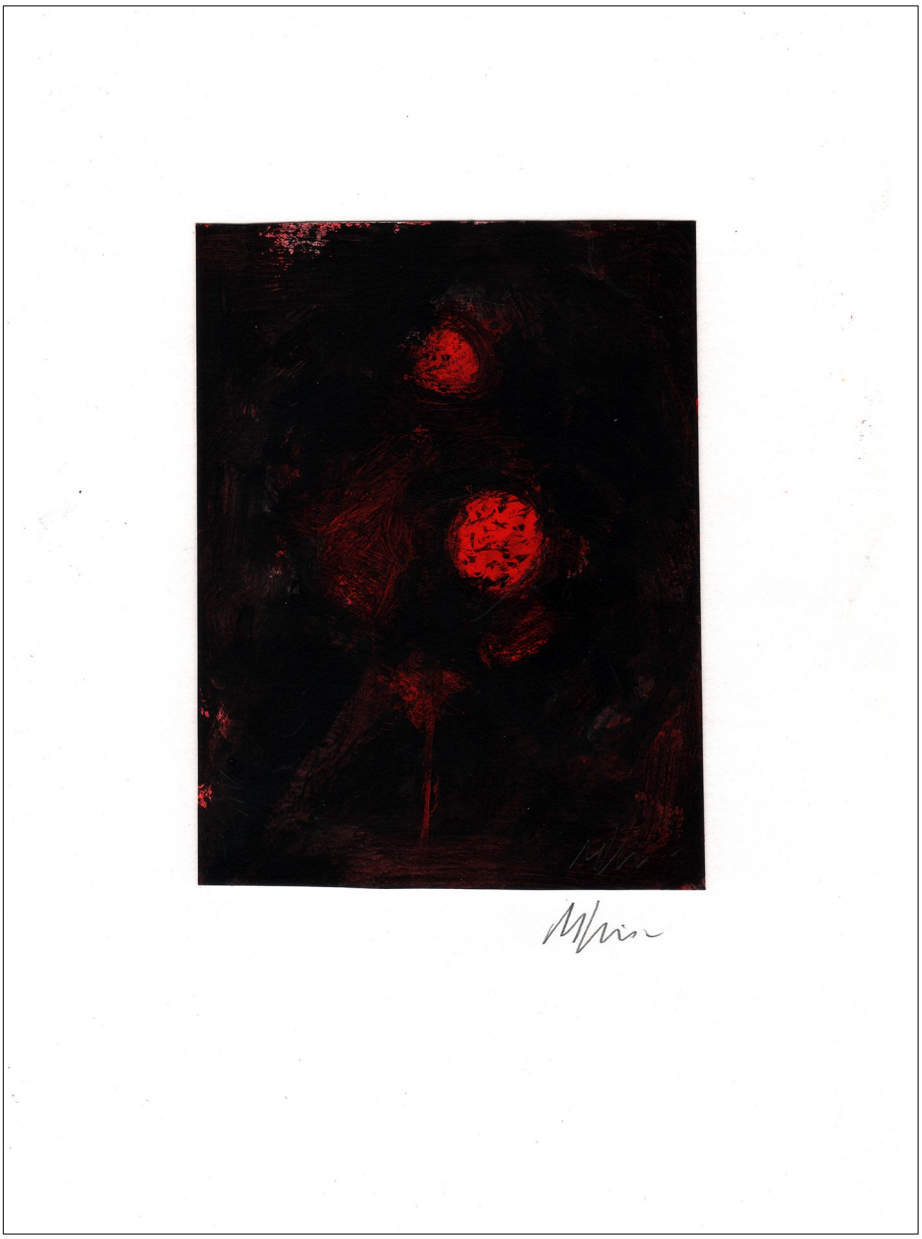
4) Chauí, M. – ***Quem sabe faz a hora***, in **Brasil 247**, April 4, 2020 link

The Imagination of Disaster, Total Arts Gallery, Dubai, 2011
link: https://archive.org/details/TheImaginationOfDisaster

Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Still-life with figures, pencil on paper, 2020,
Quarantine Drawings series

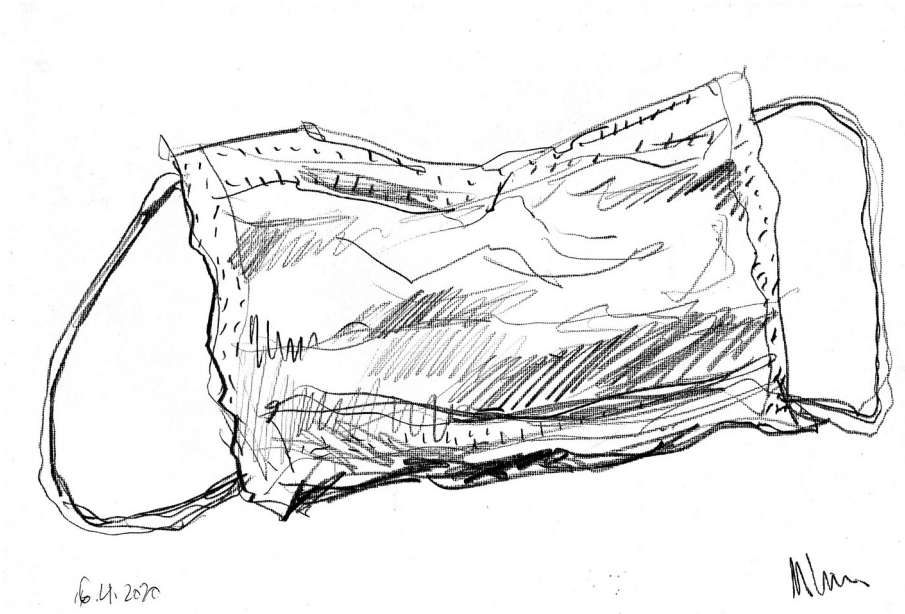


Marcelo Guimarães Lima,
Pandemic worker,
colored pencil on paper, 2020,
Quarantine Drawings series



Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Microcosm, acrylic on paper, 2020,
Quarantine Drawings series

Marcelo Guimarães Lima,
Ad astra,
colored pencil on paper, 2020,
Quarantine Drawings series

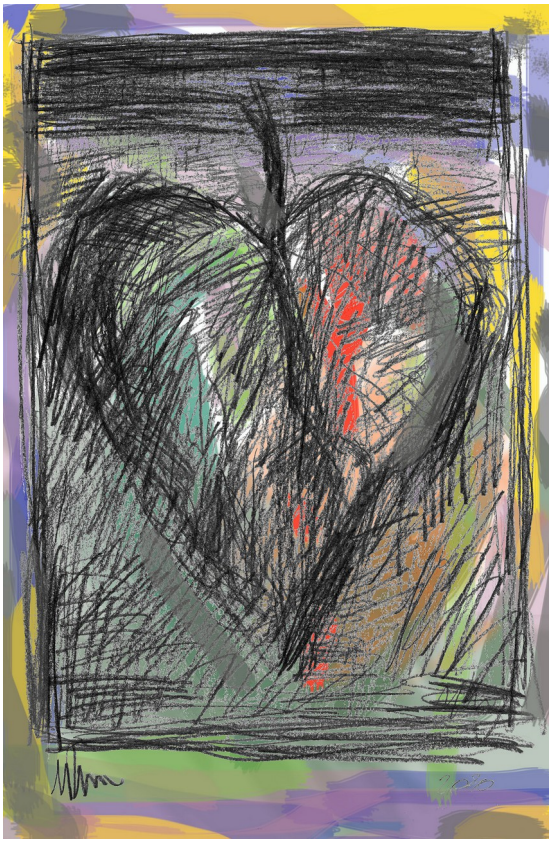


Marcelo Guimarães Lima,
Still-life,
pencil on paper, 2020,
Quarantine Drawings series

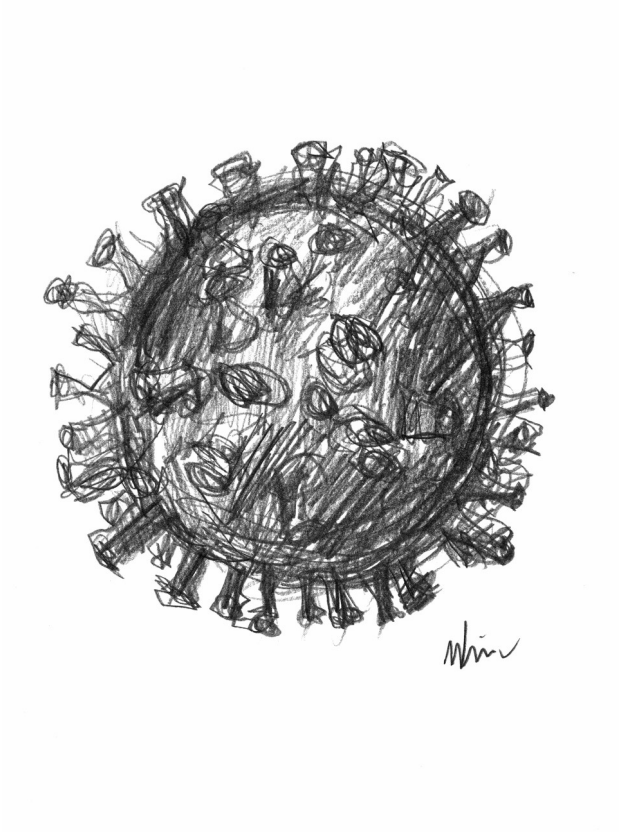
Marcelo Guimarães Lima, Self portrait, pencil on paper, 2020, Quarantine Drawings series

Marcelo Guimarães Lima,
Mutant Flora,
pencil and digital color, 2020,
Quarantine Drawings series

Marcelo Guimarães Lima,
Still-life, pencil on paper, 2020,
Quarantine Drawings series



Marcelo Guimarães Lima,
Still-life – Green Heart,
pencil and digital color, 2020,
Quarantine Drawings series



Marcelo Guimarães Lima,
Still-life, pencil on paper, 2020,
Quarantine Drawings series

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cepaos@cepaos.org
mguimaraeslima.cepaos@gmail.com
cepaos.org@gmail.com
www.cepaos.org

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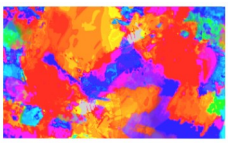

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